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ABSTRACT

There has been specific, measurable progress made in education, but there are threatening trends that could wipe it out. These trends--the back to basics movement, minimum competency testing, vouchering, and the tax revolt--all support each other, and can cause detrimental effects on education if they should succeed. Ways that the federal government can combat these movements include the establishment of a system, procedure, or apparatus to continually reevaluate educational needs; the assessment of what our schools have accomplished and still need to accomplish; the encouragement of educational research and development in order to discover more effective methods and procedures; the effective dissemination of information generated by public funds. (SAS)

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# LET'S BUILD ON THE STRENGTHS OF OUR COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM:

## A Recommendation to Educational Policy Makers

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## Introduction

One of the advantages of a democratic society is that it promotes continual public scrutiny of its public schools and allows for citizen participation in changing the educational system. It is ironic, therefore, that this process now threatens to lead us to abandon the basic goal that our public education system was created to achieve: the promotion of democracy itself. My primary recommendation to Federal legislators who would build a background for educational action in the 1980's is that they begin by reaffirming this historic goal.

Reaffirmation would involve 1) reviewing the egalitarian goal itself, 2) recognizing necessary educational objectives that derive from it, 3) acknowledging what progress we have made in reaching these objectives, 4) examining the current trends which contradict the goal and its inherrent objectives, and 5) analyzing the rationale which makes these trends appear acceptable.

It is my hope that this procedure would lead Federal policy makers to reaffirm our educational objectives, to structure Federal policy on an assessment of how far we have yet to go to achieve them, and to commit the Federal government to the kind of research which will determine the most effective ways to get there.

## Reaffirming an Historic Purpose

### 1. Jefferson's Goal for Education

A recent article by R. Freeman Butts reviews how our public schools were established as a political investment in the future of democracy.[1] In revising the laws of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson "...proposed a system of public schools, governed by public officials and supported by public funds, to overcome the political inequities and privileges inherent in private education." (Butts, 1979, p.7) It was Jefferson's contention that

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1. Educational Vouchers: The Private Pursuit of the Public Purse. Phi Delta Kappan (61/1), September 1976, 7-9.

public schools would help break down family, class, and economic privileges and help guarantee that each citizen would have an opportunity to develop his or her potential. This, Jefferson believed, would not only promote democracy, but would also create an alert citizenry eager to sustain democracy.

As Butts notes, this principle gained its national acceptance state by state, and our commitment to it remains in the state constitutions. Yet as Federal funds have financed an increasing percentage of public school operation and educational development, these funds have been allocated with stringent stipulations that they be spent in a manner that helps eliminate inequalities in educational opportunity. The Federal government has sometimes found it necessary to exercise this control defensively--by withholding funds from states and cities where there is disparity in the quality of educational opportunity. This fact demonstrates that we have not yet effected fully equal opportunity in education--even within local systems; but it also indicates that the Jeffersonian goal for education is Federal as well as state policy.

2. Recognizing Objectives Inherent in the Goal

I believe that two objectives can be logically deduced from our goal of democratizing America by creating equal educational opportunity for all our citizens: 1) As there is no one curriculum that can fit every individual, we have pursued an objective of building diversity into our educational programs. This objective has tried to meet the diverse needs, abilities, talents, and interests of our citizens at all economic levels in all geographic regions. 2) At the same time, we have been committed to developing each citizen's potential into as viable a commodity in modern society as possible so that both the society and the individual can achieve success. Thus our goal to provide equality in public education has been bound to an objective which would provide quality education at the same time.[2]

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2. I am obligated to note that Butts' article indicates he would not agree that meeting individual needs or interests or preparing citizens to succeed in jobs can be deduced from Jefferson's political purpose in proposing public education.

3. Acknowledging the Progress We Have Made

The goal of democratizing our society by attempting to guarantee everyone quality education has developed slowly but continuously in our nation. And much of our progress has been relatively recent. In a powerful argument for what our schools have accomplished, Harold Hodgkinson[3] writes that in the past 30 years, we have done for over 75 percent of our students in elementary and secondary grades what we were expected to do for a fourth of them in 1950--get them prepared for the higher education they seek. He points out that this has drastically broadened the group of students taking college entrance exams and that although we might have expected a very dramatic drop in the scores on such exams, the scores have actually fallen off by only a few questions.

Although Hodgkinson's point is an effective response to critics who cite declines on college entrance exams as an argument that our schools have failed, it does not point out that our comprehensive, public schools have been intended to serve the non-college-bound student as well. In arguing that we are beset with "compelling problems that must be solved if free public education is to survive," Virginia Sparling, president of the national PTA, recently acknowledged that "U.S. schools educate more people to a higher level than any other nation, ..."[4] If literacy is defined in terms of very basic competency, we have achieved nearly total national literacy for all citizens who are not physically or psychologically handicapped to degrees that make them ineducable.[5] Understandably, this is not yet adequate. Even if the literacy necessary to function effectively in society did not change as society develops, we would be eager to educate our citizens to much higher levels of literacy. This

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3. What's Right with Education. Phi Delta Kappan (61/3), November, 1979, 159-162.

4. Kids, Teachers, and Parents: "Give Us Better Schools." U.S. News and World Report, (87/11), September 10, 1979, 31.

5. For a book-length analysis of literacy in the United States, see Cook, Wanda Ranksza. Adult Literacy Education in the United States. Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1977.

ambition explains some of the criticism that prods our educational system to develop more effective methods, materials, and teachers.

Our intense concern over education in the U.S. has, when coupled with its democratizing purpose, guided our comprehensive system to the position of world leadership that Sparling noted. That success has led other nations to turn to it as a model. Yet, even in the face of this external recognition, internal public expectancies, criticism from both our educational and lay communities, and media focus on the negative are promoting educational trends which threaten the very existence of our comprehensive public schools by locking us in on a course that would abandon Jefferson's goal.

As Daniel Tanner notes in a recent article,[6]

> It is ironic that in the 1970s various American commissions and panels advocated that we abandon the American invention of comprehensive schooling at a time when advanced nations, after a long and continuing effort toward educational reform, are beginning to make significant progress toward instituting this model....This movement reflected the need for a more highly educated populace to meet the industrial and technical demands of post-war development and "also as a means toward social and political justice in terms of social mobility and economic quality."[7]

It appears that the critical concern that may lead us to toss the baby out with the bath water has not clouded the objective perspective of nations such as Sweden and Great Britain, which see the best students in the U.S. performing at least on a par

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6. Splitting Up the School System: Are Comprehensive High Schools Doomed? Phi Delta Kappan, (61/2). October, 1979, 94.

7. The internal quotation is cited from "The International Context." In Caroline Benn and B. Simon, Half Way There: Report on the British Comprehensive School Reform. London: McGraw-Hill, 1970, p. 1.

with their own[8] and who note the rest of our citizenship being better prepared for the technological age by our comprehensive schools than their citizens are prepared by their elitist, separatist educational systems. Their observation is verified, for example, by the number of U.S. citizens who have won Nobel prizes in science the past 20 years. Seventy-three have gone to Americans. The country that is closest to that distinction is Great Britain with 22.[9]

4. Examining Some Threatening Trends

It is my contention--as well as that of many others who preface their understanding of education on its Jeffersonian mission--that some of the prevalent educational trends and forces are anti-egalitarian and could lead us to abandon our historic educational goal.

Minimum Competency Testing. Foremost of such movements is the national sweep to minimum competency testing legislated at the state levels--and in some states at the local level. In a matter of only a very few years, minimum competency testing has been adopted in some form in nearly every state. The stated purpose of such tests is to hold students responsible for the content the test covers before promotion or graduation is granted. An accompanying purpose is to guarantee that teachers will teach what the test measures.

The major threat of minimum competency is its tendency to force low achievers out of our schools, returning us to the days when a majority of students quit school before graduation. One of the very valid educational problems that has been a traditional concern has been the number of students who quit our schools. Although school dropout has been dramatically reduced, it is still as high as 25 percent before

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8. Wolf, Richard M. Achievement in America: national report of the United States for the International Educational Achievement Project. New York, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1977.

9. "U.S. scientists' hold on Nobel prizes seems likely to loosen soon." The [Louisville] Courier-Journal, Oct. 31, 1979, p. A11.

the completion of grade 12. I argue that in the light of our continually improved ability to keep students in school, our present dropout rate is still much too high, but it is not a "national disgrace" as a former U.S. Commissioner of Education recently contended.[10] The fact that we have kept more and more children in school should be viewed as an accomplishment, as should the fact that in the past 20 years the percentage of students who seek higher education has tripled. By studying such trends, we should be able to determine how we can more fully democratize the high school diploma. What could become a national disgrace is the growing tendency to judge academic success by a narrowing, academy-approved content and to fail all those students who will not or cannot master such a curriculum. The impact of rigid adherence to minimum competency testing can only be to frustrate many more students into quitting school.

The meritocracy resulting from minimum competency reflects the recommendations of several national panels in recent years, which as Tanner noted, have suggested that comprehensive education of all citizens is a mistake. In 1969, the National Advisory Council on Vocational Education advised against encouraging broad segments of society to seek college education. In 1971, the U.S. Commissioner of Education proposed work experience to promote career choice in the very first years of education. In 1976, the National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education appropriately called for more awareness of society's educational responsibilities outside of schools, but it did so with the rationale that providing equal opportunities inside the school is an unreasonable burden. Contrast this Federal impetus with Jefferson's proposal for schools as a vital social equalizer.

Clearly, the impact of minimum competency testing is to veer our educational system away from its dual commitment to equality and quality in education. Minimum competency testing will foster quality education for only students of higher intellectual capacity. And even that capacity will be measured by a very narrow content. The

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10. Kids, Teachers, and Parents: "Give Us Better Schools." U.S. News and World Report, (87/11), September 10, 1979, 31.

result will bring some financial relief from the responsibility of educating all our citizens; but our schools will no longer be tools to prepare and mold our citizens into a stronger nation. Rather it will separate them into educated intellectual elitists on the one hand and those who have been rejected by the schools as failures on the other.

The Voucher System. Separation by meritocracy is complemented by another educational trend--the voucher system--which promises to base an elitist system on the very social and economic determiners that Jefferson saw as threats to democracy. Briefly, the voucher system proposes to allow parents to use public money to send their children to any school they chose. By applying their vouchers along with personal funds, more affluent families can afford private schools; less affluent families will need to rely on a severely diminished, fund-starved public system. Whereas some private schools appropriately exist on private funds because they emphasize particular educational theories and methods, the voucher system will allow parents to bypass racial integration and/or select their schools on purely elitist principles.

Proposition 13. In California, where the voucher system stands its best chance for early acceptance, tax revolts have already cut educational expenditures. The result is that public schools face an austerity similar to that which they could experience under a voucher system. Increased class size and the elimination of special programs destroy a school's ability to deal with diverse needs, and while the more capable student may have the native resources to survive with less loss of intellectual development, the less capable students--and particularly the intellectually handicapped--are stripped of the attention needed to provide them with the educational opportunity to develop what potential they have.

It is no coincidence that such tax cuts have spurred the formation of private schools in California, promising to encourage schools whose enrollments are determined by elitist, socioeconomic factors. Nor is it coincidental that California is the hot bed of the movement to legislate the voucher system, which would financially weaken the comprehensive educational system.

"Back to Basics." I believe that the "back-to-basics" movement in education in the United States is closely linked to both the trend to minimum competency testing and movements that would strip public schools of public funds.

The relation of the "back-to-basics" movement to minimum competency testing stems from an important limitation inherent in testing. In reading, for example, testing cannot measure readership, which is the life activity that instruction should develop. Readership involves the life habit that develops when the reader synthesizes what he or she reads into a structure of life concepts and values. A student develops readership during and following this synthesis; he or she acts on what is read and consequently understands how being able to read is a viable and essential life skill. Jefferson understood this, or he would not have proposed that education would carry over into citizenship. Test makers understand it too, but they have not yet devised a means of measuring how individuals comprehend a passage by synthesizing it into their individual structures of concepts; nor can test makers follow the reader about measuring how he or she uses what is understood in a passage.

What tests measure is often much more concrete. In reading, too many tests measure factored subskills isolated from the child's experience. If such tests are adopted as the determiner of student success, the isolated subskills become the emphasis of the curriculum. Knowing that the student's promotion or graduation will depend on his or her score on a test, the teacher will teach to it, emphasizing the artifically factored skills it measures. Knowing that the test does not measure how much of a reader the student actually is, for example, the teacher will tend not to

develop readership because it is not something the test will hold the teacher accountable for.

Since the "back-to-basics" movement is often articulated in factored skills that can be defined for accountability, its proponents welcome competency exams that tend to reflect this emphasis. Thus both trends can reinforce each other and promote the development of lower level thinking skills at the expense of the higher level skills measured on college entrance exams. This is ironic, for it is the score decline on such tests that proponents of minimum competency and "back-to-basics" have adopted as their prime rationale.

The "back-to-basics" movement would assure that educators emphasize particular skills. I believe that such control of the curriculum will seriously hamstring the ability of the schools to meet the diverse needs of students and that those whose diverse needs are ignored will fall behind and by the wayside as they lose interest, fail to learn, and fail competency tests. In this way, the "back-to-basics" movement endorses schools based on a meritocracy.

Many proponents of the "back-to-basics" movement boldly admit that they endorse rigidly controlled content in order to guarantee the teaching of values they believe are basic, traditional, and valid. This is the position of the Council for Basic Education, and it is proudly purported by Paul Copperman, who calls himself the "intellectual leader of the back-to-basics movement." If such forces are allowed to exercise this form of censorship, they can limit school content to ideas that tend to be valid for a limited segment of our population. This would impair the ability of educators to teach to their students' particular backgrounds and interests. Most importantly, the control of content to instill approved value systems will open the door to indoctrination by any ideologists who gain control of the approval procedure. This potential of the "back-to-basics" movement to limit the content of curricula links it to trends that would strip our comprehensive educational system of funds and would promote an elitist system where parents could reward an indoctrinating curriculum with public money.

How affirmation assumes defensive funding. Even though the trends reviewed briefly above gain their endorsement at state and local levels, I believe it is essential that Federal policy makers understand the counter relevance of these trends to our dual national commitment to equality and quality in education. The Federal government must always effect its impact on our educational system through state and local entities, and just as it has had to protect equal educational opportunities from the effects of racial segregation and other biases, I believe it must guard against interests that would lead to the abandonment of our comprehensive schools. An affirmation of the democratizing purpose of education assumes that Federal support to the development of educational change will promote the attainment of that goal.

5. Analyzing the Rationales Behind the Threatening Trends

The key support for all of the trends described briefly above comes from declines reported on nationally administered tests. In general, the current application of such statistics to the evaluation of our schools has been careless at best and irresponsible at worst. The flagrant misuse of these data in the national evaluation of our schools has been fraught with the following illogical and unscientific practices:

a. Declines on some measures have dominated the rationale for drastic educational change whereas score comparisons from other tests which show no decline have been relatively ignored. There has, for example, been agonizing over score declines on college entrance exams, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT); yet, the fact that students have held their own on a battery of achievement tests designed by the same agency that produces the SAT has gone virtually unnoticed.

b. Score comparisons from other studies demonstrate pupil improvement mixed with very slight declines--depending on age levels and the skill or subskill measured. These include the most carefully conducted achievement comparisons

we have; yet the encouraging results of our National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading,[11] for example, have had very limited dissemination and exposure, as have other encouraging studies.[12]

c. By ignoring some of the better data, the critical analyst often mixes and combines data in totally unacceptable ways. Aptitude scores (SAT) are combined with or accepted as achievement scores; scores from one test are compared to those from another which measures subskills with a totally different emphasis; scores from one population are compared to scores of a population from a significantly different socioeconomic environment; scores for age levels are compared to those for grade levels; comparisons are made with no consideration of changes in vital factors such as age differences, dropout rates, socioeconomic shifts, etc; declines on math scores are lumped with reading scores; etc.

Dependable product comparisons using student achievement scores are extremely difficult to obtain. We do not now have data that is even close to adequate to support or condemn our educational system or to reliably dictate sweeping educational changes; but a mega-analysis of the best we do have gives mixed indications at worst.

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11. Reading in America: A Perspective of Two Assessments. Denver: the Assessment, Education Commission of the States, 1976.

12. Cook, W.C., Adult Literacy Education in the United States. Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1977.

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Larsen, J.J.; Tilman, C.E.; and Cranncy, A.G. "Trends in College Freshman Reading Ability.: Journal of Reading 19:367-69; February 1976.

Wray, M. A Comparison Study of the Reading Achievement of Sixth Grade Students in 1917 and Eighth Grade Students in 1919 with Sixth and Eighth Grade Students in 1978. Master's thesis. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1978. (Unpublished)

d. The use of SAT score declines to promote minimum competency and emphasis of the "basics," is, as noted above, ironic. The test measures a very high level of literacy; it does not measure minimum competency in basic skills. Equally important, such tests measure only a portion of students in two grades; thus to use it to evaluate performance of all students in those grades is inappropriate. To use it to attack education across the board is an outrage we have somehow overlooked.

e. As we rely on test scores to guide the current impetus for educational change, we remain relatively ignorant of the processes that actually educate. We need to focus on teacher behavior in research and development as well as in evaluation.

I believe that a large share of the responsibility for an emphasis on carelessly interpreted educational data lies with the media. In reporting on education, the media have given an almost singular emphasis to critics who make careless use of data. There are some understandable causes of this situation. One is the press' seeming conviction that bad news sells. Another is that to be able to present alert, informed coverage of test scores, for example, a reporter must have adequate knowledge of testing, the area tested, and statistics. This knowledge base covers numerous technical considerations. Since not even the television networks seem willing to approach education news with that special expertise, the media tends to take any data-based criticism of our schools as unchallengeable fact. The repetitive printing and airing of attacks on our schools has convinced the public that there are severe crises in education. Yet we simply do not have adequate data to support that alarm. If other educational areas are treated like reading, the media's careless use of data and the tendency to ignore encouraging information recommend a more objective public forum.

## Recommendations

The consideration of current educational trends I have cited as threats and of the rationales that appear to support them recommends a Federal perspective that is somewhat defensive. Yet with this defensive reaffirmation of the democratizing purpose of education, the Federal government can do much to encourage educational change and development that can help us realize our dual commitment to quality and equality. I believe there are several general steps that Federal policy makers can follow to logically asure this:

1. First, the Federal Government can establish a system, procedure, or apparatus to continually re-evaluate educational needs. Such a procedure would need to probe the various aspects of contemporary citizenship to determine what kind of literacy and mathematical skills, for example, are basic to the success of society and the individual. It could determine how basic the development of critical thinking skills are to the sustenance of a democratic nation and what values relate to that objective. This would assure both that societal changes are defined for the consideration of educational change and that those changes would not abandon the principle of providing educational opportunity to all citizens.
2. With a continuously updated validity of needs as objectives, the Federal Government could promote careful assessment of what our schools have accomplished, are accomplishing, and must yet accomplish in order to meet those objectives. This would allow us to build on our strengths. The Federal Government could commission very carefully structured trend studies that would collect and create significant data, and which would make viable interpretations of that data to suggest possible conclusions about the status of education. Such studies must, of course, consider all relevant test, educational, and societal factors.

It is vital that this continual assessment of where we are consider process as well as product. As noted, the power of tests to reveal educational accomplishment is limited, and we know embarrassingly little about what actually is happening in the classroom. New research methodologies are developing to allow us to portray typical teacher behavior and professionalism, and the Federal Government should give heavy endorsement to this descriptive effort.

3. Coupled to a current description of a) where we need to go with education, b) how far along that path we are, and c) what we are now doing to close the gap, the Federal Government can encourage educational research and development to attempt to discover more effective methods and procedures to get there. We need extensive efforts to determine what methodologies are most effective in the classroom.

I believe this third and very vital phase of Federal involvement should place a heavy emphasis on research related to procedure as opposed to product. There has never been a pronounced Federal emphasis on improving teacher practices or teacher education. Thus the Federal Government should contribute to the improvement of teacher education by increasing its funding of experimental preservice and inservice training. I believe that the role of the teacher is the key to improved instruction. Yet the average elementary teacher will take less than one year of courses in professional education preparatory to beginning teaching and the secondary teacher will take less than a semester. There is no guarantee that any one course will deal with the best practices and methodologies.

Teacher education programs that incorporate a fifth year of intern teaching, or differentiated staffing, or increased field experiences in schools should be encouraged. In addition, government funds can be of vital assistance to school systems and education institutions in upgrading the preparation of teachers by promoting the development of better courses.

The Federal Government should encourage and fund additional educational research efforts that are directed toward the solution of known problem areas in education. For example, it is a well established fact that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more apt to experience reading difficulties than children from middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds. We need to continue to expend resources to develop reading methods, materials, and programs that can be used more effectively with such populations, taking account that children do not all have the same background of experiences and opportunities. Thus, a child from one locality can differ extensively from a child in another locality. Because of this, their needs--and consequently the appropriate instructional methodology and materials to be used--should differ.

In promoting such development, Federal incentives should encourage changes that more effectively link instruction within the school itself to the educational opportunities in and responsibilities of our society at large. This effort should not only make education more effective but should help educate the public that it is unwise to expect schools to accept sole responsibility for the intellectual and skill development of our children.

4. Finally, the Federal Government has the obligation to effectively disseminate the information it generates with public funds. This has not always been the case in the past. For example, the Federal Government cut funding of the National Assessment study to a point where the contractor has been unable to carry out effective dissemination of its findings.

If teachers, professional educators, parents, decision makers, and the public at large are to express their concern and have input into decisions affecting education, they need to exercise that input from a fully informed perspective.